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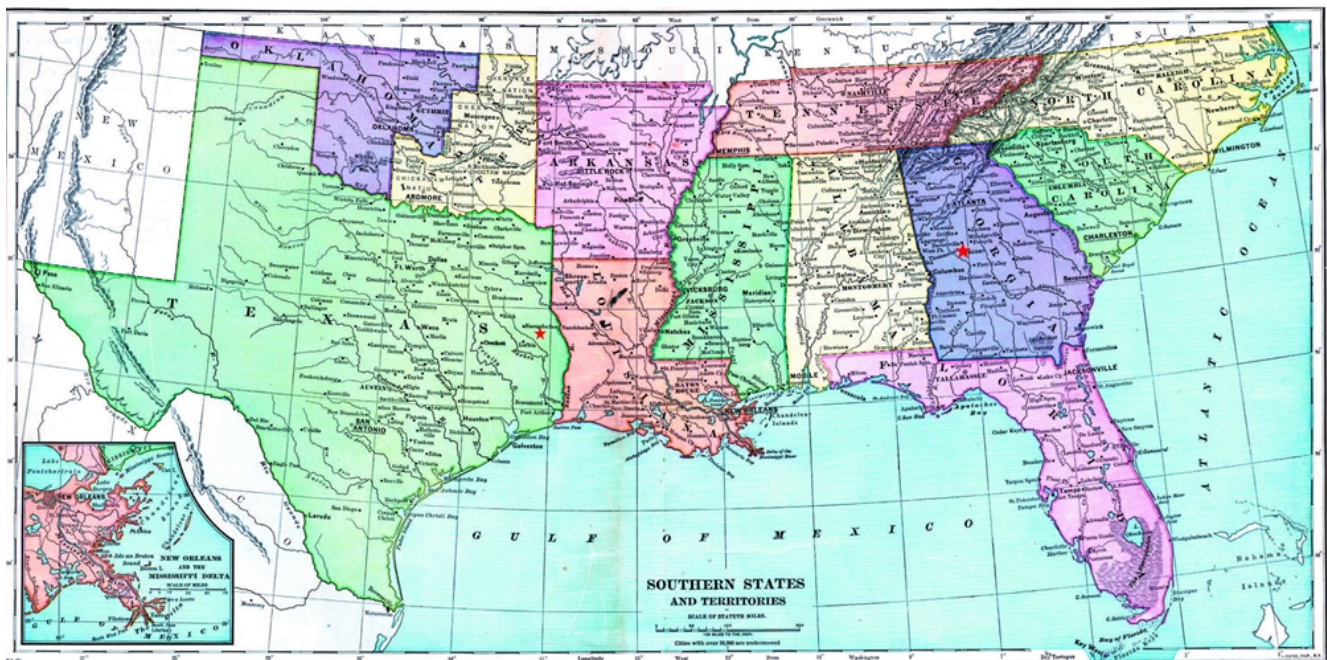
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Turning High Plains to Farm Ground

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Absalom Terrell Collier was born December 14, 1876 in Upson County, Georgia. His parents were Robert Terrell and Francis Ann (Shattles) Collier. Sometime after 1880, his family loaded their belongings in a wagon and headed west. They settled in East Texas.

Ab (as he was called) grew up in the rolling pine and hardwood hills of East Texas. He was lanky and probably over 6'4" tall. Oral family history tells us as a young man he broke wild horses to ride. In 1895, he married Eudora Belle Stewart in Melrose, Texas. They made their home in the Melrose area of Nacogdoches County. Ab and Dora had six children who survived past infancy: Alton Terrell, Lula Bell, Christine Sybil, Pauline, Lora Pearl, and Douglas Woodrow. As were most of the men in rural East Texas, Ab was a farmer.

Eudora was born in Mississippi in 1877. Her father, Eli Stewart, was a Primitive Baptist minister whose travels to deliver the Message led his family from Georgia to Alabama to Mississippi to Louisiana, finally putting down roots in the East Texas county of San Augustine, just east of Melrose. Dora's mother passed away when Dora was only six or seven. Eli was married three times; researchers should note his first and third wife were both named "Jane".



Eli Stewart and his third wife, Jane Pate Stewart. Eli is holding Sallie. Jane is holding John. Eudora Belle Stewart is standing. Photo was taken in 1893.



Eli and his third wife are buried in the Shiloh Cemetery near the Denning community of San Augustine County, Texas.

Dora's sister and the oldest sibling, Mary Elizabeth, was 25 when their mother died. Mary helped Eli raise her brothers and sisters and was no doubt was an important person in young Dora's life. Mary Elizabeth Stewart, married William (Billy) Barton O'Neal in 1879. They made their home in San Augustine County, where they stayed at least through the 1920 census.



William (Billy) Barton O'Neal as a young man.

Billy and Mary O'Neal left San Augustine County sometime after 1920. The early 1920's found them farming near Lubbock, Texas.



This is a low resolution photo of William (Billy) O'Neal on a mule. The setting appears to be in Lubbock County, Texas.

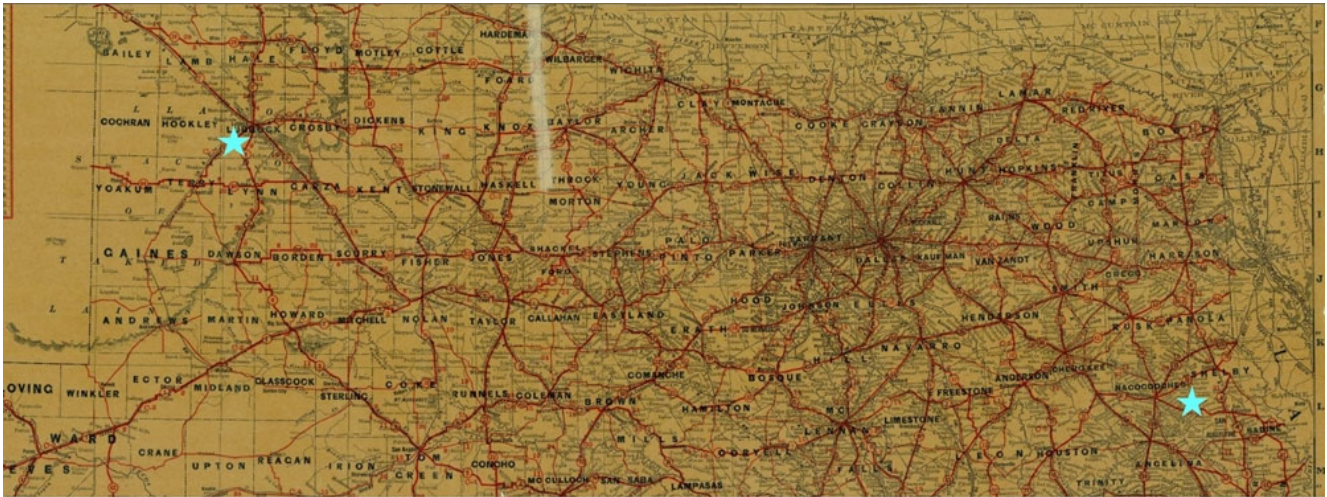
The 1920s were a time of change for American farmers. During the years of World War I farmers prospered due to high prices resulting from war-torn Europe's diminished agricultural capacity. To address the high demand for agricultural products, the United States government encouraged an expansion of farms and farming assistance programs. However, as Europeans recovered from the devastation of the war, U. S. agricultural exports fell and prices began to slide. With the mistaken thought that prices would stabilize, the government continued to promote farming expansion.

As the 1920s progressed, it became more and more difficult to make farming pay in the small fields cleared between the forested East Texas hills. The close-knit Collier family was hard hit as farming prices continued to plummet. Cheap land was available elsewhere, including the Texas Panhandle. And it was being discovered that the grass-covered High Plains of the Panhandle, once known as part of the Great American Desert, could be extremely productive farmland under the right conditions.

Dora began experiencing some medical issues, and her doctor suggested she consider moving to a drier climate. Meanwhile, the farming economy in East Texas seemed to be getting worse. Ab and Dora decided to take their family to the Lubbock, Texas area where sister Mary and her husband,

Billy O'Neal were raising cotton. They most likely made the move in the late fall of 1925 or early winter of 1926, after the cotton harvest.

Ab, with sons Alton and Douglas, loaded equipment, livestock, and other belongings on a train and went ahead by rail. The rest of the family followed by automobile. In the group traveling by car were Dora and her children, Lula Bell (with toddler Helen and her husband, Burette Doss), Pauline, and Lora Pearl. Daughter Christine Sybil was married, had left Nacogdoches, and was building her new life with her husband. Also included in the car were Alton's wife, Tommie Inez, and the couple's three sons: Cecil Ensley, Homer Raiford, and Lenox Ravonne. It was no doubt a tiresome trip, covering some 450-500 miles in a 1920's automobile, with 6 adults and 4 children, and over roads that, compared to today's, were probably poorly paved and not well-maintained.



1921 Road Map of Texas, stars mark the locations of Lubbock (left) and Nacogdoches (right) counties. The two areas are 450-500 miles apart.



The family moved into the Wollforth area, southwest of Lubbock, where they worked a place known as the Napper Farm.



The group had not been in the area long before the shine began to wear off their move. The monotonous landscape with unending horizon and constant sun and wind was in sharp contrast to the green hills of East Texas.

Ab found farming conditions in the High Plains were different and with a set of unique challenges. The wide-open expanses made farming large tracts possible, but the single-row farming implements Ab brought from East Texas were out of place.



Farming with one-row, horse-drawn plow.

Even horse-drawn multi-row equipment was giving way to mechanization with the introduction in 1918 of Ford's mass-produced tractor, the Fordson.



Multi-row horse-drawn farm equipment contrasted with mechanized farming equipment of the 1920s.

Rain was scarce, averaging less than 20 inches of rainfall per year, as opposed to the 40-50 inches they were accustomed to in East Texas. Winter snow was common, and a wind-driven 3- or 4-inch snow could result in 2-foot drifts if an obstacle was there to stop it.

Panhandle farmers had yet to realize the fine, fertile soil was delicately held in place by shallow, tenacious grass roots. Turning the soil with a plow opened the ground up to erosion by the never-ending wind, generating immense, suffocating dust storms. During periods of extreme drought these conditions combined to ultimately result in the infamous Dust Bowl days of the early 1930s.



Dust storm

Then on April 20, 1926, William (Uncle Billy) Barton O'Neal died. He was buried in the City of Lubbock Cemetery.



Ab managed to purchase multi-row farming equipment. The Collier family left the Napper Farm and moved to an area northeast of Lubbock where they worked the Duncan Farm. Meanwhile, the Napper Farm was purchased by Riley Micajah ("Wig") O'Neal, son of Billy and Mary O'Neal.



Lubbock, Texas 1926 (Left to right) Pauline, Lula Bell, Ab, Lora Pearl, Helen, Dora Belle



Alton and Inez Collier with sons Cecil (on left), Homer (in back), and Lenox (right front).
Photograph made in the Lubbock area circa 1926.



Burette Doss holding daughter, Helen, Lula Bell (Collier) Doss, and Homer Collier in front of windmill in Lubbock, Texas area.



Left to right: Lula Bell (Collier) Doss, Homer Collier (boy in front), Helen Doss (in bonnet), Lora Pearl Collier, and Cecil Collier. Lubbock, Texas area.

In 1927, Henry (Bud) Turner drove from Nacogdoches to Lubbock with the intention of taking Pauline Collier for his bride. The two were married in the Lubbock area on July 22, 1927. In October of 1927, the newlyweds, along with Burette and Lula Bell Doss and daughter Helen, returned to Nacogdoches. Lula would give birth to her second child the following month.

Sometime in 1928, Mary O'Neal moved to Midland, Texas to be with her son, Bascom Ely "Slim" O'Neal. She may have been ill when she relocated.

On October 23, 1928, Ab wrote to Burette Doss in Nacogdoches and asked him to find him a farm – they were coming home. Sometime between the time of cotton harvest in December 1928 and January 1929, the Colliers returned to Nacogdoches. Family history tells that a crowd gathered at the train depot when the equipment and livestock were unloaded. Locals had never seen such massive farming equipment. Ab parked the equipment at his farm where the curious came from miles around to ask if they could look at these High Plains implements.

Mary O'Neal died in Midland, Texas on February 13, 1929. She was buried in the City of Lubbock

Cemetery. Here sister, Eudora, was back in East Texas and was not able to attend the funeral.



The move to Lubbock left lasting impressions. Homer Collier, son of Alton and Inez, started first grade in Lubbock. Homer remembered his hands were always chapped by the wind so he tried to keep his hands closed so the redness wasn't obvious.



Homer Collier, First Grade, Fall 1928

Pearl and Douglas were caught outside in one of the characteristic dust storms. They were able to

make their way home by holding on to and following the wire fence. Lula often told her grandchildren how lightning would strike a barbwire fence and travel along the fence great distances.

Dora said Ab spent all the time they were in Lubbock chasing his hat!

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